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ASSIGNMENT COVER SHEET**

Student: **Michael Higley-Vance**

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**EL7008-8**

**Dr. Linda Collins**

**Online Learning Communities**

**Activity #5: Assessment and Feedback**

**Comments:**

**Faculty Use Only**

Hi, Michael, you have clearly discussed the value of both formative and summative assessment and how they should be included in every class to add value to the experience. You bring forth that one of the most difficult issues is finding the best assessment tool for the activity and your assessment tips provide some helpful guides to making this decision. There are a number of assessment opportunities for e-learning environments that you discuss in this paper. Collaboration, reflection, and self-assessment are valuable and provide students with critical thinking opportunities; however, many students have not participated in

this way before. Rubrics are great tools to assist students with evaluating their performance as well as others. How do you engage students in the use of assessment tools that they are unfamiliar with? Dr. Collins

Dr. Linda D. Collins    6.9    2.9    May 12, 2014

Assessing Online Collaboration

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### Assessing Online Collaboration

The purpose of this paper is to (a) identify forms of assessments, (b) discuss assessment characteristics, (c) list learning supporting learning theories and (c) describe four different ways to assess online collaborative activities. The goal of collaborative learning activities is to provide students with learning opportunities where learners are able to interact while sharing and processing new information (Haythornthwaite, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Zygouris-Coe, 2012). Assessing individual learning and achieving full online participation can be difficult without the appropriate assessment tool. According to Palloff and Pratt (2005) assessing online collaboration can be challenging and require the instructor to create assessment tools that evaluate individual student learning and group participation. Additionally, communicating evaluation results with online learners can be just as challenging as creating the assessment tool (Palloff & Pratt, 2005).

### Forms of Assessment

Assessment is the process of identifying specific and measurable goals, collecting evidence of student learning, and implementing changes to future instruction for the purposes of improving student achievement (Mansson, 2013). Assessing student learning in the online environment can be in the form of formative or summative assessments, according to Palloff and

Pratt (2007). Formative assessments are ongoing and occur at several points throughout the course. The objective of formative assessments is to monitor student learning, which will provide the instructor ongoing feedback that can be used to improve teaching and instruction (Tinoca, Oliveira, & Pereira, n.d.). More specifically, formative assessments help learners identify personal strengths and weaknesses and help to create future learning goals. Additionally, formative assessments are generally low stakes assessments, having low or no point values. Palloff and Pratt (2005 & 2007) and Hadjerrouit (2013) share some examples of online formative assessments, which include: student self-reflections, self-assessments, discussion rubrics, collaborative assessments, peer-to-peer feedback, and student working portfolios.

The objective of summative assessments is to assess student learning at the end of a course by comparing it against a previously set standard or benchmark (Tinoca, Oliveira, & Pereira, n.d.). Information from summative assessments can be used to focus and realign overall course objectives and assignments for future course offerings. Summative assessments are often high stakes, having a high point value. Examples of summative assessments might include: midterm exams, final projects, extended writings, or a final portfolio. However, Palloff and Pratt (2007) note that using only summative assessment types ignores many of the basic guiding principles of collaborative online student assessments.

### **Assessment Characteristics**

Assessing collaborative group activities require the instructor to understand basic principles of online student assessment. Morgan and O'Reilly discuss six key qualities of collaborative assessments, which include: explicitly stated performance expectations, authentic tasks, a facilitative structured assessment, timely assessments, and an awareness of the learning

context (as cited in Palloff and Pratt, 2005). The multitude of variables linked with assessing collaborative activities is a challenge for online instructors as they develop collaborative activities. The first step in determining the assessment tool is to identify the goals and objectives (Mansson, 2013; Swan, Shen, & Hiltz, 2006) of the collaborative activity. The difficulty is found in matching the activity to the appropriate assessment tool. The following assessment tips provide a guide for online instructors as they develop collaborative group activities and assessments:

- Identify the learning outcomes – assessments should be products of the activity and student learning (Swan, Shen, & Hiltz, 2006).
- State explicitly the activity expectations – learners must know the activity objectives and performance expectations before beginning (Palloff & Pratt, 2005).
- Use rubrics – explicit evaluation criteria with assigned values based on levels of participation and content should always accompany an online collaborative activity (Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012; Swan, Shen, & Hiltz, 2006).
- Provide timely assessment feedback – value learner work and effort from the very beginning (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Palloff & Pratt, 2005).
- Use a reflective process - learning occurs at a deeper level when students are able to reflect on their own learning knowledge and experiences (Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Simonson et al., 2012).
- Allow learners to develop portfolios – serves as evidence of individual and group work (Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Simonson et al., 2012).

### **Supporting Theories**

Given the context of e-learning, constructivism, connectivism, and social learning theory are three learning theories that best supports online learning activities and assessments (Bandura, 1977; Brindley, Walti, & Blaschke, 2009; Siemens, 2005). Constructivism states that learning is an active process of constructing ones own knowledge rather than acquiring it (Hwee, 2013; Paily, 2013; Siemens, 2005). Learner knowledge is constructed based on personal experiences and through social interactions (Paily, 2013). Connectivism blends together cognitivism, behaviorism, and constructivism theories of learning and relates to the process that occurs within a constantly changing learning environment (Siemens, 2005; Shriram & Carlise, 2010). Connectivism focuses on making connections between the content (Mallon, 2013) and interactions with others (Siemens, 2005; Shriram & Carlise, 2010). According to Siemens (2005) these connections enable learners to learn more and are “more important than our current state of knowing”. Bandura’s social learning theory states that learning happens by observing, interacting, imitating, and modeling other participants’ learning experiences (Bandura, 1977). Social learning theory is considered to be a blend between behaviorist and cognitive learning theories because it comprises of social interaction, memorization, and learner motivation (Brindley, Walti, & Blaschke, 2009; Siemens, 2005).

### **Ways to Assess Online Collaboration**

#### **Self-Assessments**

Assessing student learning can happen in a number of ways to include learner self-assessments. Self-assessments can be considered formative or summative depending on how learner results are used to guide future instruction and learning (Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Tinoca, Oliveira, & Pereira, n.d.). Collaborative activities are best assessed collaboratively (Palloff & Pratt, 2007) and with the appropriate rubrics learners can assess their own learning and the

learning of others easily (Tinoca, Oliveira, & Pereira, n.d.). According to Palloff and Pratt (2005) learners often know more about the level of participation each group member contributed than the instructor. Learners who actively engage in collaborative activities retain new information and increase their ability to self-reflect (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). Finally, according to Palloff and Pratt (2007), instructors can quickly assess student learning by asking questions such as:

- How well do you feel you met the learning objectives?
- What grade do you feel you deserve and why?
- Based on the collaborative assignment expectations what grade do you feel each participant should receive and why?

### **Reflective Assessments**

Meaningful self-reflections are important assessment tools for determining the level of online learning interactions, community building, and overall understanding of learning objectives (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Cranton and Mezirow state that critical self-reflection is a significant part of transformative learning (as cited in Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Self-reflective assessments allow learners to connect with content at a much deeper level and provide the instructor with evidence of individual learning (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Learner self-reflections can be completed via instructor made surveys or through journal writing. Requiring learners to provide significantly relevant peer-to-peer feedback increases their own self-reflective skills (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). Furthermore, the process of self-reflection forces learners to compare their standard for learning to the learning standards of other group members (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). It is important to note that Palloff and Pratt (2007) recommend instructors provide

learners with clear peer-to-peer feedback expectations, which include providing others with quality, timely, and professional feedback.

### **Collaborative Projects**

Collaborative projects, or performance-based activities, are essential to the learning process of online class environments (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). This is especially important in a constructivist account of learning, where the instructor is replaced by knowledge and experiences of other learners (Lai, 2011; Shiriram & Carlise, 2010). Collaborative projects, such as group – portfolios, are designed to exploit the benefits of collaborative peer learning through the use of technology (Lai, 2011; Shiriram & Carlise, 2010). According to Lai (2011) peer interactions provide opportunities for learners to develop critical thinking skills and allow the instructor to assess mastery of overall course goals and objectives. However, Palloff and Pratt (2005) maintain that participants of collaborative group projects can best assess collaborative projects. Additionally, instructors may ask learners to assess and justify their view, compare it with that of other collaborative group members, or revise existing beliefs (Lai, 2011). Lai (2011) suggests the use of rubrics, with appropriate examples and project expectations, be provided to learners to help guide them in the project completion.

### **Rubrics**

Ultimately every assessment practice results in the use of a rubric, regardless of the learning environment or learning activity (Simonson et al., 2012). Rubrics are tools that help define the performance expectations of a given task or assignment (Hwee, 2013; Palloff & Pratt, 2005). Rubrics provide learners with assignment expectations and provide learners with a way to evaluate their own learning, as well as the learning of other participants within collaborative activities (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). Rubrics can be used to evaluate individual student learning,



participation, or overall group performance (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). According to Conrad and Donaldson (2012) collaborative activities should be assessed for the product and process. Additionally, the use of rubrics to assess learner discussions is also especially useful when evaluating a learner's ability to synthesis, analyze, and justify important and complex information (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Online asynchronous discussion also allows learners the opportunity to reflect on the contributions of other collaborative group members (Swan, Shen, & Hiltz, 2006). Furthermore, rubrics create self-awareness and provide learners the opportunity to compare their own performance against that of other participants and the instructor's performance standards (Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Swan, Shen, & Hiltz, 2006).

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